DECLARATION ON ADVANCING WOMEN WORKERS' RIGHTS AND CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY IN LARGE-SCALE COMMERCIAL INVESTMENT SCHEMES IN THE EAST AFRICAN COMMUNITY (EAC)

Preamble

We, representatives of women workers, trade unions, civil society organisations, government institutions, regional bodies, legislators, national human rights institutions, development partners, private sector actors, academia, human rights practitioners, and other stakeholders from across the East African Community (EAC), gathered in Arusha, United Republic of Tanzania, on 13th July 2026 for the Regional Dialogue on Advancing Women Workers' Rights and Corporate Accountability in Large-Scale Commercial Investment Schemes in the East African Community (EAC);

Recognising that governments across the East African Community are pursuing economic transformation through foreign direct investment (FDI), regional integration, industrialisation, implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and expansion of investments in agriculture, plantations, mining, manufacturing, renewable energy, infrastructure, tourism, fisheries, transport corridors, digital technologies, and other strategic sectors;

Acknowledging that these investments present significant opportunities to create employment, improve infrastructure, increase public revenues, strengthen regional integration, and improve living standards.

Affirming that investment is not an end in itself and that economic success cannot be measured solely by capital inflows, gross domestic product, or the number of investment projects approved;

Reiterating that the true measure of development is whether it advances human dignity, gender equality, decent work, environmental sustainability, and shared prosperity and ensuring that the benefits of economic growth are equitably enjoyed by all people, particularly women workers and affected communities;

Recognising that women are the backbone of East Africa's economies, contributing significantly through commercial agriculture, plantations, horticulture, floriculture, fisheries, mining, manufacturing, tourism, cross-border trade, entrepreneurship, informal economic activities, and unpaid care and domestic work, yet continue to receive only a fraction of the economic benefits generated by their labour while bearing a disproportionate share of the social and economic costs of development, and remain concentrated in low-paid, insecure, and undervalued forms of work;

Deeply concerned that women workers continue to experience widespread labour rights violations, including insecure and informal employment, temporary and subcontracted work, absence of written contracts, unequal remuneration for work of equal value, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, inadequate occupational safety and health protections, limited access to social security, maternity protection and healthcare, restrictions on freedom of association and collective bargaining, discrimination, trafficking, sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH), retaliation for reporting abuse or organising collectively, and significant barriers to justice and effective remedies;

Recognising that these violations are neither isolated nor accidental but reflect entrenched structural discrimination, unequal power relations, and economic systems that perpetuate gender inequality and economic violence against women, limiting their equal participation in and benefit from economic development;

Further concerned that the rapid expansion of large-scale commercial investment schemes has, in many instances, resulted in land dispossession, displacement, environmental degradation, loss of livelihoods, food insecurity, and exclusion from decision-making processes, particularly affecting rural women, indigenous women, pastoralist women, women with disabilities, migrant women, and other women experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination;

Noting with concern that women frequently lose access to farmland, forests, grazing land, water sources, and other natural resources essential to their livelihoods without adequate consultation, compensation, or recognition of their independent land and property rights owing to discriminatory legal, customary, and administrative practices;

Recognising that women's meaningful, informed, and effective participation in decisions relating to land governance, natural resource management, investment approvals, workplace governance, and rural development is a fundamental human right and a legal obligation, and that sustainable investment cannot be achieved where women are excluded from decisions that directly affect their lives, livelihoods, and communities;

Acknowledging that workplace violence and harassment, including sexual harassment, remain among the most pervasive yet underreported violations experienced by women workers in commercial investment schemes, with many women forced to endure abuse for fear of losing the income upon which their families depend;

Further recognising the persistent structural inequalities that continue to disadvantage women in employment in relation to pregnancy, maternity, and caregiving responsibilities, including pregnancy discrimination, career interruptions, reduced earnings, inadequate maternity protection, lack of breastfeeding facilities, limited access to affordable childcare, insufficient flexible work arrangements, and gaps in social protection, thereby reinforcing economic inequality and undermining women's equal participation in the labour market.

Reaffirming that States bear the primary obligation under international, regional and national human rights law to respect, protect, and fulfil human rights by regulating business activities, exercising due diligence to prevent, investigate, sanction, and remedy human rights abuses committed by both public and private actors, ensuring that investment laws, trade agreements, fiscal incentives, special economic zones, and development policies are fully consistent with national laws, regional commitments, and international human rights and labour standards;

Further reaffirming that attracting investment increases rather than diminishes the responsibility of States to regulate private actors effectively and that States cannot outsource their human rights obligations to investors, corporations, or commercial enterprises;

Recognising that businesses have an independent responsibility to respect human rights in accordance with the United Nations (UN) Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, and the role of National Action Plans on Business and Human Rights in advancing responsible business conduct, strengthening regulatory and policy frameworks, and promoting access to remedy, including through gender-responsive human rights due diligence, the identification and mitigation of risks of labour exploitation and gender-based violence, meaningful stakeholder engagement, prevention of adverse impacts throughout operations and supply chains, and accessible, independent, and effective grievance and remediation mechanisms for affected workers and communities;

Acknowledging the importance of mandatory, independent, gender-responsive human rights and environmental impact assessments for all major investment projects before approval and throughout implementation, including assessment of risks relating to displacement, labour exploitation, land rights, trafficking in persons, gender-based violence and harassment, environmental degradation, occupational health and safety, and adverse impacts on women's livelihoods and economic empowerment;

Recognising the need to strengthen labour inspectorates, national human rights institutions, labour tribunals, equality bodies, and judicial and non-judicial grievance mechanisms to ensure timely, affordable, independent, survivor-centred, and gender-responsive access to justice and effective remedies for all women workers, including migrant women and women in the informal economy;

Recalling the obligations contained in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), including General Recommendations No. 34 on the Rights of Rural Women and No. 35 on Gender-Based Violence against Women; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Fundamental Conventions, including Convention No. 190 concerning Violence and Harassment in the World of Work; the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights; the Protocol to the African Charter on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol); the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA); and relevant East African Community treaties, protocols, gender policies, labour standards, corporate governance frameworks, and investment instruments;

Acknowledging the progress made by EAC Partner States in establishing labour institutions, policy and legal frameworks, and regional mechanisms to promote gender equality, decent work, responsible investment, and corporate accountability, while recognising that implementation, enforcement, coordination, monitoring, and accountability remain inadequate and require renewed political commitment and investment;

Recommendations

Basing our recommendations on the lived experiences and proposals put forward by women workers from across the region, while reflecting on the need for stronger accountability mechanisms within commercial investment schemes.

We hereby adopt this Declaration and commit to advancing the following actions:

1. Strengthening Labour Rights Protection and Decent Work Standards

We call upon governments, investors, employers, and labour institutions to:

- Strengthen enforcement of labour laws and standards within commercial investment schemes, including plantations, agricultural estates, factories, and other large-scale investment projects.
- Ensure that all workers, including temporary, casual, subcontracted, migrant, and informal workers, enjoy effective labour protections.
- Promote secure employment arrangements, fair wages, written contracts, occupational health and safety protections, maternity protection, social security coverage, and equal pay for work of equal value.
- Strengthen gender-responsive labour inspection systems capable of identifying and addressing violations affecting women workers.
- Ensure that labour rights protections remain central in investment promotion strategies and agreements.

2. Preventing and Eliminating Gender-Based Violence and Sexual Harassment at Work

We commit to promoting workplaces that are free from violence, harassment, discrimination, and abuse.

We call upon governments, employers, investors, and workers' organisations to:

- Develop, implement, and enforce workplace policies preventing sexual harassment and gender-based violence.
- Establish accessible, confidential, survivor-centred grievance and reporting mechanisms.
- Ensure timely, impartial, and effective investigation of GBV and sexual harassment complaints.
- Protect survivors and complainants from retaliation, intimidation, and further harm.
- Strengthen referral pathways connecting survivors to legal, medical, psychosocial, and other support services.
- Support the training and deployment of Gender Champions within workplaces and investment schemes to promote prevention, awareness, reporting, and accountability.

3. Advancing Corporate Accountability and Responsible Investment

We recognise that investors and businesses have a responsibility to respect human rights throughout their operations and supply chains.

We therefore call for:

- Mandatory and effective human rights due diligence processes for companies operating within the region.
- Transparent accountability systems that enable workers and affected communities to raise concerns and seek remedies.
- Integration of gender equality, labour rights, and human rights protections into investment policies, contracts, and agreements.
- Stronger monitoring mechanisms involving workers, trade unions, civil society organisations, and relevant government institutions.
- Greater transparency regarding workplace conditions, labour practices, grievance mechanisms, and corporate compliance.

4. Protecting Women's Land and Resource Rights

Recognising the disproportionate impacts of large-scale investments on rural women, Indigenous communities, pastoralist women, and smallholder farmers, we call for:

- Protection of women's land rights and meaningful participation in land-related decisions.
- Transparent, inclusive, and rights-based land acquisition processes.
- Fair compensation and remedy where communities experience displacement or loss of livelihoods.
- Recognition of women's role in managing natural resources and sustaining local economies.
- Investment approaches that promote community benefits and avoid further marginalisation of vulnerable groups.

5. Strengthening Women Workers' Voice and Representation

We affirm that women workers must be central participants in decisions affecting their rights and livelihoods.

We commit to:

- Strengthening women's representation in trade unions, workplace committees, investment governance structures, and policy processes.
- Creating safe platforms where women workers can share experiences and influence reforms.
- Supporting worker education on labour rights, grievance mechanisms, and available remedies.
- Promoting collective bargaining systems that respond to gender-specific workplace challenges.

6. Commitments by Stakeholders

Governments and Regional Institutions

- Commit to strengthening legal frameworks, enforcement systems, labour inspections, and accountability mechanisms to protect women workers.

Businesses and Investors

- Commit to respecting human rights, implementing responsible business practices, preventing workplace violence and harassment, and ensuring access to effective remedy.

Trade Unions and Workers' Organisations

- Commit to strengthening women workers' representation, supporting collective action, and promoting awareness of labour rights.

Civil Society Organisations and Development Partners

- Commit to supporting capacity building, research, advocacy, documentation of violations, and strengthening accountability pathways.

Women Workers and Gender Champions

- Commit to continuing to organise, share experiences, support one another, and participate actively in advancing workplace justice and equality.

Conclusion

We affirm that investment should not only generate economic returns but must also protect human dignity, promote equality, and improve the lives of workers and communities.

A prosperous East African Community must be built on investments that respect human rights, uphold decent work, prevent violence and discrimination, and ensure that women workers fully participate in and benefit from economic development.

We therefore commit to advancing investment frameworks that place people, dignity, equality, justice, and human rights at the centre of sustainable development.

Adopted in Arusha, Tanzania, on 13 July 2026.

Signatories:

- Southern and Eastern Africa Trade Information and Negotiations Institute (SEATINI)
- East African Civil Society Organisations' Forum (EACSOF)
- Diakonia
- East African Legislative Assembly Women's Caucus (EALA Women's Caucus)
- East African Law Society
- Tanzania Plantation and Agricultural Workers Union (TPAWU)
- Kenya Human Rights Commission (KHRC)
- Legal and Human Rights Centre (LHRC)
- East African Trade Union Confederation (EATUC)
- GROOTS Kenya
- Women workers' representatives, civil society organisations, government representatives, and partners present at the Regional Dialogue

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